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# Introduction

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***Sexing the Colorlines: Black Sexualities,  
Popular Culture, and Cultural Production***



## **Introduction**

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This special themed issue of *Poroi* includes revisions of a sample of papers presented at the symposium “Sexing the Colorlines,” which took place on November 16, 2009 at the University of Iowa. The UI Project on the Rhetoric of Inquiry and the Center for Ethnic Studies and the Arts co-sponsored the symposium, where presenters considered the role that gender, race and ethnicity, class and nation played in the construction and material reality of sexualities. Papers included two panels that animated this process -- one on sexualities and cultural production, and the other on sexualities and the public sphere. Associate Professor of English and African and Black Diaspora Studies at DePaul University, Francesca Royster, delivered the keynote address for the symposium, which we include here. We also include articles that were not a part of the symposium, but that capture the spirit of the event. Papers in this issue cohere around how sexualities manifest in the experiences and representations of people of African descent in the U.S. Each scholar presses the boundaries of sexuality studies, by thinking through and beyond scholarship that focuses on heterosexism and the queer subject, to explore emancipatory heterosexuality, queerness, pornography and kink; anti-monosexuality and new epistemologies of sexual and gender performance; and, the queering of heterosexuality. This issue represents a range of interdisciplinary fields, including film, literary, music, performance, media, political, studio art, and autoethnography studies.

Francesca Royster’s piece on Parliament Funkadelic examines how lead musician and producer George Clinton creates new spaces for non-normative heterosexuality through a unique music aesthetic, visuality, and performance. She argues that P-Funk’s “power to harness emotionally strong and sometimes inchoate feelings had a powerful effect on its audience—prompting some to find

unity and empathy with other black men.” Vershawn Ashanti Young furthers the work of innovative theorizing about Black masculine performance, by positing compulsory homosexuality as a critical analytic. Young does not seek to reify a narrow-minded or conservative viewpoint of homosexuality. To the contrary, he posits the term to describe an uneasy collision between race and sexuality to black male gender performance -- a performance that he argues “must always respond to the question of homosexuality in relation to whiteness.” Young defines the performative slippage between heterosexual and homosexual performance in critical writings, in film, and in the public sphere. Similarly, Rebecca Wanzo explores articulations of heterosexual, heteronormative, and the Black female romantic imagination in the twenty-first century, by interrogating “the complex interplay of western romantic love narratives, black feminism, legacies of the Moynihan Report, and liberal individualism.” Wanzo utilizes cable news specials on Black love and marriage, the iconography of Barack and Michelle Obama, and the Disney animation film *Princess and the Frog*, to illustrate how the assumed fairytale of Black love in the national imagination is one that demands illustrative remixing by the creative imaginations and lived experience of Black women.

Our volume moves from contexts of cultural production in the public sphere to the textual representations of sexualities in art, film, and literature. Deborah Elizabeth Whaley begins this section with a paper that critically assesses Spike Lee’s 2004 corporate and sexual “dramedy” *She Hate Me*. She paces through key themes presented though not adequately worked through in the film, including the cultural politics of memory in relationship to the Watergate scandal of the 1970s, neoliberalism in the contemporary corporate sphere, and representations of procreation and Black sexuality, to argue that Lee presents a phantasmagorical and homonationalist depiction of Black feminine sexualities. Kinitra Brooks views sexuality from an “other-wordly” perspective, to evaluate the speculative and horror fiction of Black female writers Tananarive Due and L.A. Banks. She views the writers’ worlds of vampires, slayers, shifters, angels and demons as creating imaginative and oppositional gazes of Black female sexuality, authority, and struggle. Similar to the work of the seminal science fiction writer Octavia Butler, Brooks argues that Due and Banks reclaim “the black woman’s body as a powerful place of agency for personal explorations of pleasure and pain and

the possibilities for socio-political change within the black community.” Our special issue ends with a creative essay by Alea Adigweme, whose writing oscillates from cultural criticism to the autoethnographic in her reciting of the difficulty of political, racial, gender, and sexual belonging. In so doing, she provides new registers for understanding the affective assemblage of identities within black, feminist, queer, and BDSM communities. Adigweme’s ability to remark more broadly on the cultural aspects of sexual politics through personal biography cuts to the heart of the intervention and contribution this issue of *Poroi* hopes to make in her ability to engage readers at multiple levels of critical consciousness.

Naqueeb Stevens’ photography composite and video installation provides a dramatic interlude that appears strategically in our special issue, which aims to ground the sexual discourses emerging from the articles within an embodied visual narrative. Stevens’ installation metaphorically asks the spectator to contemplate how popular images of Black masculinity refract against the actual Black male body form to reveal the absurdity of their mass-mediated representation in the popular imagination. Comparatively, our cover art for this issue by Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, titled “Illuminated,” re-envision Pablo Picasso’s “Blue Nude” (1902). Whaley remixes Picasso’s famous painting of an emaciated European American female subject as a woman of African descent engulfed in the continent of Africa. Blue hues in the former Picasso become vibrant, rich browns; a svelte figure becomes voluptuous and curvy; straight hair becomes wild, woolly, and curly; and a blue exterior of melancholy becomes a black exterior illuminated by a sign of nation for which the vulnerable nude subject is in the center. As each article, essay, and visual installation here asks the reader to re-examine conceptions of race and sexualities in cultural production and in the public sphere, we hope that collectively “Sexing the Colorlines” offers a way to *see*, *imagine*, and *live* Black sexualities anew.

**Deborah Elizabeth Whaley**